Ministry of Agriculture

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Please note: Due to declining readership, the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture will discontinue the Farm and Food Report. The last report will be issued this week. Saskatchewan Agriculture would like to thank you for your interest and participation over the past years. For information on Saskatchewan Agriculture's programs, services and events, please visit www.agriculture.gov.sk.ca.

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Log Number: 08-26-114
Week of June 23, 2008

RESEARCH INTO REJUVENATING ALFALFA STANDS YIELDS RESULTS

Forage legumes comprise a big part of agricultural production in Saskatchewan. Alfalfa continues to be a popular forage crop, due to its nitrogen-fixing ability, high yield and high nutrient value, as well as its adaptation to a wide range of climatic and soil conditions.

Alfalfa fields typically produce maximum yields for the first few years after establishment. Then, as fertility and moisture levels decrease, their productivity tends to diminish.

The University of Saskatchewan's Department of Soil Science recently undertook a multi-year study to assess various approaches to rejuvenating alfalfa stands and extending the number of years they can productively grow. The initiative received support through the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture's Agriculture Development Fund.

According to Diane Knight, a professor in the Department of Soil Science and project leader, there were two parts to the research. The first part focused on alfalfa stands that were roughly five years old and in declining productivity due to decreased fertility. The second part looked at stands that were a year old, where inoculants laid down at seeding to increase the fertility of the crop may have failed.

"Inoculants are products that have micro-organisms in them," Knight explained. They assist in the natural fertilization process for legume crops. "It's very important for any kind of legume crop to be inoculated properly, and it's really important in organic systems, where you are not allowed to put commercial fertilizers down."

Two main types of microbial inoculants were looked at in the research – rhizobium, which is targeted at nitrogen fixation in legume crops, and *Penicillium bilaiae*, a fungus that grows around the root system and makes phosphorous more readily available for uptake by the plant.

The study ran for three years on test plots in the Smeaton, Star City and Crooked River areas of the province. For the first part of the project, various treatments were drilled into a standing, mature alfalfa crop and followed for the next two years.

This approach produced limited results in terms of rejuvenation.

"We got a response the year in which we applied some of the inoculants and some of the fertilizers, but it was never sustained for very long," Knight stated. "So it was just sort of a one-time reaction to adding

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these things in that single year, not a long-lasting benefit that the crops caught. As a result, it's probably not something that is very economical for forage producers to do."

However, there was one positive result that was discovered largely by accident. Gypsum, which is high in sulfur, was used as a carrier for the inoculant treatments. On one alfalfa stand that had been planted into sulfur-deficient soil, Knight noted that the additional boost of sulfur through the gypsum carrier proved to be quite beneficial to the health and vigour of the stand.

"We often think of nitrogen and phosphorous as the major nutrients that we need to worry about," she observed. "But I think with alfalfa, particularly in some of the northern areas, sulfur is probably as important or more important."

To examine the second part of the research, alfalfa was planted without inoculants, which were instead added in the subsequent year.

"Normally, this stuff is put down as the crop is seeded. However, we were trying to simulate a situation where the inoculant may not have worked properly the first time, or where the farmer simply didn't use it for some reason," Knight said.

This approach worked very well, as there proved to be little difference between the test plots where inoculation was delayed by a year and the control plots that were inoculated as they were seeded.

Furthermore, although some farmers are hesitant to go into a standing crop and inoculate once it has been established, Knight said they found little lasting harm from the approach.

"With the system we used, we really didn't get a whole lot of damage, and any damage we did see was recoverable by the end of the season," she stated.

According to Knight, the net result of the study was that there may be limited capability for producers to influence the fertility of deteriorating alfalfa stands once they have aged past a certain point; however, when the crop is fairly young, introducing inoculants can still have a positive effect.

A copy of the ADF project *Strategies for Improving Soil Fertility in Alfalfa Stands*, #20030439, can be obtained by phoning the Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture at (306) 787-5929. It is also available on the Ministry's website at http://www.agriculture.gov.sk.ca/ under the "Research" link.

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SASKATCHEWAN HEIFERS EARN ONE-WAY TICKET TO RUSSIA

Russian beef producers seek the genetic superiority of Canadian heifers.

According to Gary Smith, Principal of Alta Exports International Ltd, "customers in Russia recognize that Canada has a unique and successful cattle identification program. This, and the fact that Canada is climatically similar to many regions of Russia, results in a high level of customer confidence in the quality, standard and suitability of Canadian purebred cattle and genetics."

A Québec company, Comtois International Export, is rounding up thousands of heifers to send to Russian farmers, who are willing to pay a high price for the well-bred cattle.

Canora-area breeders Ivan and Phyllis Olynyk, owners of Pretty View Stock Farm, sold 14 of their Angus heifers through Comtois this year.

The cattle from Pretty View Stock Farm will be held in quarantine in Montréal for approximately 40 days before being shipped to Russia.

In 2008, Comtois will ship 14,000 Canadian heifers to Russia in total, where they will be dispersed among hundreds of farms.

According to Ivan Olynyk, Comtois was hoping to purchase 1,700 heifers from Western Canada. He is confident they will meet their goals, as farmers are now aware of the options available to them.

Olynyk, who has been raising cattle for 15 years, has 150 head: 100 Black Angus and 50 Red Angus. Last year, he sold 46 females, including the nine that went overseas. The new international market is contributing nicely to the success of the Pretty View Stock Farm.

"The Russians buying from Canada are running pretty big farming organizations," says Olynyk.

He hasn't been to Russia, but three years ago he spent time in Ukraine. Because of the high quality of Canadian beef and the successful nature of Canadian breeding programs, he would not be surprised if other countries like Ukraine started importing Canadian heifers too.

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A FRUITFUL CELEBRATION IN MORTLACH

The thriving community of Mortlach is looking forward to hosting its first annual Saskatoon Berry Festival this summer.

Organizer Sylvie Mischki views the event as a broader celebration of Saskatchewan.

"It's going to be a moment to be really proud, and to look forward to all the great things the province has to offer."

To be held on July 5, the festival date was selected because saskatoons, which are plentiful in the area, will be ripe and ready to enjoy - a great way to celebrate local fruit.

Beginning with an 8:00 a.m. pancake breakfast, served with saskatoon syrup, of course, the festival committee has a full day of exciting events planned.

Hayride tours of Mortlach's own saskatoon orchard, wonderful examples of saskatoon cuisine, a local parade, live music and entertainment running all day, and an arts and crafts market all take place in celebration of the summer berry harvest.

Food vendors open their booths in the morning and run all day. After the parade, featuring the Mortlach Riding Arena Association, the festival's opening ceremonies begin at noon.

Before a fantastic bill of musical entertainment in the evening, a number of performers and speakers take the stage during the day.

Held in conjunction with the Mortlach Saskatoon Berry Festival is the interactive Mortlach Coteau Film Fest, where attendees are invited to cast their votes for their favourite films. Film awards are to be announced at 9:00 p.m. on the band stand. Afterward, the evening will showcase live music and entertainment until midnight.

The idea for the Mortlach Saskatoon Berry Festival was initiated by the owners of the Mortlach Sweet Shoppe and Prairie Berries, but it did not take long for the idea to start shaping into reality. Volunteer support from the community has been overwhelming.

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"Pretty much everyone in the whole village will be involved in pulling this off," said Mischki.

In addition, the Saskatchewan Association of Agricultural Societies and Exhibition (SAASE) played a vital role by providing seed money to get the project off the ground. Moreover, the SAASE brought renewed focus of the village economic development council's goal of bringing together the agricultural community with the village.

Mischki notes that in the 1920s, the Mortlach Agricultural Society used to host an annual fair, but over time the event disappeared.

"Our community is based on agriculture, and it was in the past, but somehow a separation happened. This event is hopefully bringing us back together more visibly, which is how we have to be."

The Mortlach Saskatoon Berry Festival is an example of the village's can-do attitude. "You walk into the village now and go 'Wow! This is a community that wants to be here,'" said Mischki. The community is well maintained and invests in its beauty. Moreover, Mischki credits Mayor Ron Locke with the work he does to help the village thrive.

With tremendous support from the community, the Mortlach Saskatoon Berry Festival is sure to be a great success.

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MAN'S BEST FRIEND IS ALSO A VALUABLE MEMBER OF THE WORK TEAM

A farmer uses tools, machinery, and appropriate facilities to manage business, and he or she often relies on family members or staff to keep the farm running smoothly. But one very important member of the team is often overlooked: the stock dog.

Stock dogs are bred specifically for the handling of livestock. There are several breeds that are used and continue to be bred for their strong working abilities, such as the Border Collie, Australian Shepherd, Australian Cattle Dog and the Australian Kelpie.

Typically, stock dogs are used to help herd or move livestock. They have a natural ability to 'round up' herds, and when trained properly, they provide great value in the efficient handling of large animals.

Norm Sommer, President of the Saskatchewan Stock Dog Association, has been working with Border Collies for about 12 years. He explains that cattle, in particular, are often more comfortable around a trained stock dog than they are around humans.

Stock dogs do not work with cattle exclusively. They are usually trained with sheep, because it is easier for the trainer to correct the dog among the smaller animals. While working with sheep or cattle tends to be the stock dog's usual charge, they are effective at herding goats, hogs and even wild geese.

Sommer, who met his wife at a stock dog training clinic, has two dogs. Jock and Moss work on the farm, and they also compete at stock dog trials.

Unlike more commonly known dog shows, where the animals are adjudicated for their grace, gait and coat sheen, stock dogs compete in trials. As such, they are evaluated on their ability to herd sheep in a calm and peaceful manner, keeping the herd together, moving in a straight line and finishing the task in a time-efficient manner.

The Saskatchewan Stock Dog Association hosts a number of trials each year. The events provide an opportunity for farmers in Saskatchewan to learn more about the benefits of good stock dog breeding, training and treatment.

According to the Saskatchewan Stock Dog Association website, the purpose of the association is to promote the proper training of stock dogs and their humane handling. They are dedicated to the welfare

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of both dogs and the livestock with which they work.

The association uses trials, clinics and demonstrations to promote stock dog breeding and ownership. Members are always happy to share as much knowledge as possible during these events.

Anyone interested in joining the association can call (306) 874-2818 for more information.

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SAFE CATTLE-HANDLING REDUCES RISK OF INJURY

In Canada, animal-related incidents are a leading cause of non-machinery-related deaths and injuries on farms, accounting for approximately one-third of all injuries, according to the Canadian Agricultural Injury Surveillance Program (CAISP).

By understanding an animal's movements and instincts, and following simple safety measures, animal handlers can prevent personal injury and also ensure animal welfare.

Leanne LaBrash, an animal scientist who studied at the University of Saskatchewan, holds animal-handling safety close to her heart. In 2006, LaBrash's mother broke both of her shoulders in a cattle-related incident.

Cattle-handlers can take numerous precautions to minimize the risk. Understanding cattle behaviour is the first step to safe handling.

According to LaBrash, cattle are easily startled by flapping objects such as loose clothing or dangling bags; they get spooked by loud noises and quick movements; and they do not like crossing deep shadows, power cords or hoses left on the ground. By eliminating these from their environment, cattle experience less stress and become easier to handle.

The importance of the animal's flight zone is another crucial concept to grasp. The flight zone is the distance within which a person can approach an animal before it moves away. An animal's point of balance, which is located between the shoulders in cattle, becomes the focal point when moving cattle forward or backward.

To move an animal forward, the handler is positioned behind the point of balance. To move the animal backward, the handler moves carefully in front of the point of balance.

For an illustration of the flight zone principle, LaBrash refers to *Tips for Safe Livestock Handling*, a publication produced by the Canadian Centre for Health and Safety in Agriculture at the University of Saskatchewan, available at www.cchsa-ccssma.usask.ca/ahsn/pubs/LivestockPosterblk.pdf. Along with diagrams, the publication suggests methods for preventing animal-related accidents:

- Speaking softly to an animal and making it aware of the handler's presence prevents startling. It is also helpful to be calm and deliberate, avoiding sudden quick movements.

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- Wearing appropriate footwear, such as steel-toed boots with metatarsal guards, protects the handler's feet.
- Keeping facilities in good repair and ensuring all floors, chutes and ramps have non-slip footing prevents injury.

There are many benefits when cattle handlers take the time to learn about animal behavior and safety precautions. The handler can reduce the risk of cattle-related injuries. Operations become more efficient and the understanding leads to a calmer, more manageable herd.

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